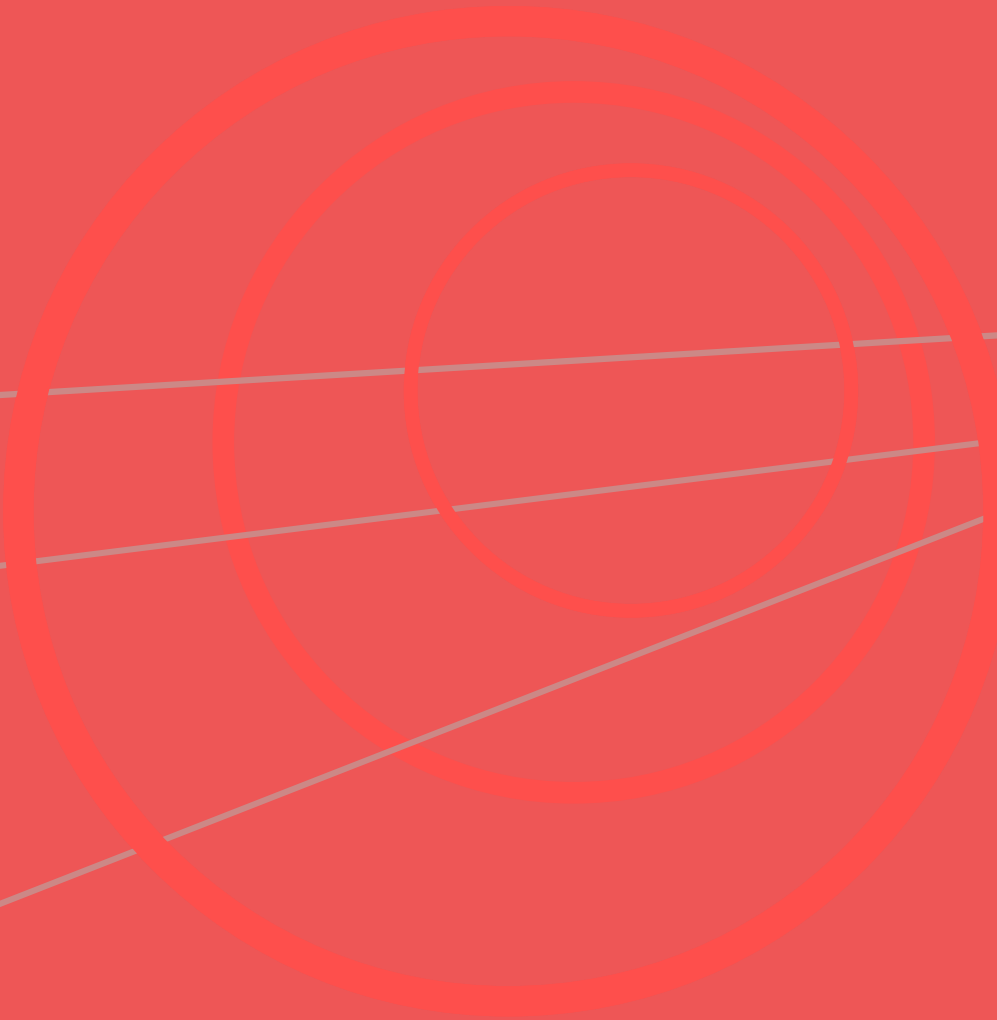


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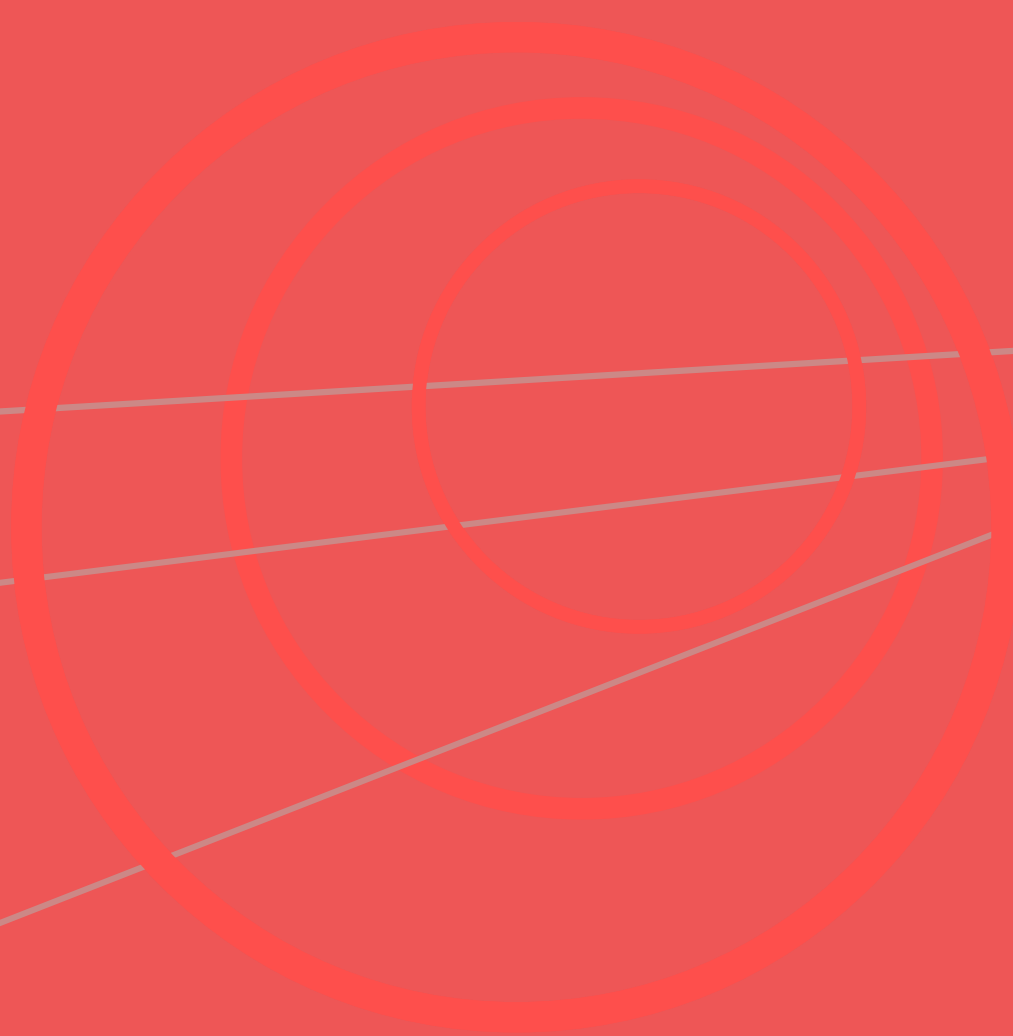


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Crowds

By Marshall Bowles

Concerts. Michelle and I loved going to them. The swaying of human bodies jammed together trying to get as close as possible to the stage, everyone hoping to capture some of the magic made by the musicians. Michelle and I were always there, side-by-side, our sweat and breath mingling with the rest of the people around us. The music itself didn't matter: country, rock, pop, metal. It was about the people around us and the energy we all created together.

Before each show, she would look up to me with her big blue eyes and say, "Promise that you won't leave my side."

And I would say, "I swear. I'll never let you go." Then I would kiss her forehead.

Michelle was funny, pretty, and she laughed at my jokes, but she wasn't perfect. She had it rough growing up. Her father wasn't around, and her mother was the queen of verbal abuse. Michelle started using alcohol to cope when she was in high school, and she was twenty when she had her first DUI. By the time we met she was sober, mostly.

She fell off the wagon four days before she disappeared. It was a Wednesday, and I came home from work to find the front door of our rental house unlocked and cracked open. A trail of clothes led from the foyer to the bedroom, where I found her naked and passed out on top of the covers. An empty bottle of vodka sat on the bedside table.

When she woke I hugged her and she started crying. "My mom called me today."

"Are you ok?" I said, gritting my teeth. Michelle's mother was a worthless old witch.

"She asked me for money," Michelle said. "But I told her I wasn't going to give it to her anymore." She leaned into me and I could feel her tears on my neck. "She said she should have gotten rid of me before I was born."

I held her like that for a long time, gently rubbing her hair. Her tears dried up, and she leaned back and looked into my eyes. "I'm so, so sorry, Mike. I needed a drink and I couldn't fight it. Do you hate me?"

"Shh," I said and pulled her closer. "I love you. I'm not going anywhere."

I took off the rest of the week from work to spend time with her. By Saturday, she was smiling brightly like she normally did. "Are you sure you still want to go?" I said. We had tickets to see Blink 182 that night.

"Yeah," she said. She hugged me tight around my waist and pressed her head to my chest. "Thank you," she said softly.

The concert was in an old warehouse that had been converted into a music hall and bar. Michelle and I got there an hour early, and we posted up right in front of the stage, waiting for the show to begin. Something in the air made me a little uneasy, but I couldn't place it. Michelle sensed my mood. "You okay?" she said.

"I don't know," I said, looking around the room. "Something doesn't feel right."

"Hey," Michelle said, smiling at me with her sparkling eyes. "Promise you won't leave my side."

I smiled and kissed her forehead. "I'll never let you go."

The room filled up while the opening act played, and it was packed by the time Blink took the stage. My discomfort only grew worse, and I felt the odd detachment from reality that only comes from dreams. The air turned thick and heavy, like I was swimming in mud. The people around us pressed in too close, and the music was wrong. Every song was in a minor key.

I kept watching Michelle out of the corner of my eye. She was singing and dancing as always. My impulse was to drag her outside to where it was quiet and safe, but I didn't. I was just being crazy, and I didn't want to ruin her night. I held onto her hand tightly, keeping her close to me.

Then Blink launched into the signature guitar riff of their song "What's My Age Again?" The crowd went insane, their screams louder than at any other time so far that night. Then time seemed to slow down. The music and voices blurred together and faded like they were far away. The bright lights of the stage were gone, and the ceiling was shrouded in darkness.

Something slammed into me from behind. I stumbled forward against the sweaty back of a guy in front of me, and I fell down on one knee. My arm was twisted back behind me at a weird angle because I wouldn't let go of Michelle. Somewhere deep down I knew that I had to hold on to her.

Michelle yanked my arm and I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder. I almost lost my grip, and she squeezed so hard I thought my fingers would break. I turned to look at her, but I couldn't understand what I saw. In my face was the chest and shoulders of a man's torso, dressed in a pale blue tank top. His neck extended out, and instead of a face, it was fused into the hip joint of someone else.

I was surrounded by a clump of body parts that melted together like candle wax. A leg connected to a chest at the knee. A shoulder turned into a hip, and the skin color smoothly faded from one part to the next. Portions of clothing were mixed into the mass,

fused to each other in the same random way as the bodies. Nowhere in the mix could I see a face.

"Mike! Help me!" Michelle screamed. The jumble of bodies between us blocked my view. Her hand was slipping out of mine, and something was pulling her away.

"I'm coming!" I said. I punched with my free hand, hitting any and every thing. I rammed my shoulder at the torso in my way. Its skin and muscle absorbed my blows like firm pillows, but it didn't move. I placed my foot on a hairy knee growing out of a neck and craned up to look over.

Michelle was on the other side, desperately clinging to my hand. The mass of bodies behind her bent together to form some kind of tunnel close to the ground. One of Michelle's legs stretched back into that hole, like something had her, but it was too dark down there to see.

Michelle looked up and our eyes met. Tears ran down her cheeks. "Don't let me go."

A slender, gray tentacle emerged from the darkness of the tunnel. It snaked up around Michelle's waist. She looked down when she felt it wrapping around her and screamed. I pulled on her hand with all my strength, but it was pointless. In one swift motion, the tentacle yanked Michelle away and down in the darkness.

"No!" I yelled. I crawled over the bodies toward the hole, punching the flesh in my path. In my haste, I put my foot in the wrong spot and slipped, falling face first into the floor. I blacked out for just a moment, and when I opened my eyes four guys were holding me down on the floor. One of them had a bloody nose.

"Get off of me," I yelled. I struggled against them, but I couldn't move. They held me down until two huge bouncers arrived, and I was hauled kicking and screaming into the alley behind the building. "You have to let me back in," I said. "Something took my girlfriend."

The cops showed up and I tried to tell them what happened, but of course they didn't believe me. Who would? They figured I got drugged out of my mind, started attacking people at the concert, and that Michelle must have ditched me. They locked me up for the night. I wanted to believe them. What I saw wasn't possible. I convinced myself that the cops were right, and I held onto the thought that it was all just a bad dream.

I got out the next day and took a bus home, but Michelle wasn't there. All of my calls went to her voicemail, and she didn't answer any of my texts. I went back to the police station and tried to file a missing person's report, but they just threatened to lock me back up again. I grew more desperate with each passing day. When the cops finally realized that Michelle was actually missing, they pegged me as the main suspect. But with no evidence and no leads, they finally gave up and quit looking.

The most important person in my world was gone. I quit showing up to work and eventually got my termination notice in the mail. My days were spent in the apartment staring at the empty places where Michelle should have been. Her head resting on the pillow on her side of the bed. Michelle standing in my way in front of the sink when we were both trying to get ready in the morning.

One day I got a good look at myself in the mirror. I had not shaved in weeks, and I couldn't remember the last time I showered. Michelle would have been disappointed in the sad sack that I became. Then I felt a burning anger rising up from my gut. Something took her from me, some monster killed her. I made a promise to myself that I would find out what it was, and I would kill it.

For two years I combed through every missing persons report I could find, looking for anything remotely similar to what happened to her. The details were always sketchy, and I had to do a lot of reading between the lines. I believed the key was to focus on cases of people who suddenly disappeared in crowded, public spaces.

I emailed a woman in Seattle who lost her boyfriend during an environmental protest. He was a former heroin addict who was working hard to get clean. They were standing together on the street holding signs. She looked away for a moment, and he was gone when she turned around. She never saw him again.

There were others. A guy in Kentucky lost his brother while they were at the track, betting on the races. A man's teenage son disappeared from beside him in the stands at a college football game. A woman's mother vanished at a country music concert. A man's husband was taken from him in Times Square on New Year's Eve.

All of the victims were addicts at one point, but they had beaten their habits. In the days right before they disappeared, each one of them had relapsed. It always happened in a public place with plenty of potential witnesses who never saw anything. With that theory, I came up with a plan.

I volunteered at a rehab facility, and that's where I met Chelsea. She was a recovering meth addict, emotionally vulnerable, and in desperate need of a boyfriend. She slept with me the same night we met, and we started dating right away. She was the perfect bait.

She relapsed in the second month we were dating. I found her at the apartment of one of her trashy friends. She was tweaked out of her mind. Chelsea fought against me, but I hauled her out of there and told her it was for her own good. I locked her in my bedroom for two days.

She actually thanked me when I let her out. I felt a pang of guilt, but I brushed it aside. Chelsea was my key to finding out what happened to Michelle. As a "reward" for her being so strong, I bought tickets to an EDM concert that weekend. She was really into that kind of crap.

On that Friday night, we stood in a crowd of people jammed close together near the stage. They were scantily clad, sweaty, and dancing with the rhythm of deep base coming from the speakers. I held onto Chelsea's hand tightly, and she looked at me and smiled. She yelled something to me over the music. I think it was, "I love you."

It happened when the main act, Vorpil Geysler, came on stage. The crowd went wild, and everything started moving in slow motion. I looked around and saw that I was no longer surrounded by people. They had been replaced by the mass of body parts melted together. I still held Chelsea's hand, but she was being pulled away. I dropped to my knees, rammed my shoulders into the creature, and crawled across the concrete floor following Chelsea as she was pulled away.

My hand touched something soft. It was a bicep, and at the crook of the elbow it connected to an ankle. I was in a tunnel made of disjointed body parts of the creature. It was dark, and I could barely see Chelsea's face even though I still held her hand. She screamed for help, but her voice sounded so far away.

What was I doing? This was madness. I should have never allowed myself to go this far, using another human being as bait. Even though I couldn't see them, I knew there were tentacles wrapped around Chelsea. I tried to pull her back anyway, but just like with Michelle, she was snatched out of my grasp.

I followed, scrambling down the tunnel until it ended in a steep drop at the edge of a giant cavern. The walls stretched away into the distance, every surface made of writhing human parts. A pale mist hung in the air below, obscuring the ground. The stalk of a giant gray mushroom rose out of the mist. It was as thick and as tall as a skyscraper, and its surface was covered in small twitching white specks.

Chelsea was carried through the air by a long tentacle that grew directly out of the mushroom stalk. She was beyond my help now, and I could only listen to her faint screams. The tentacle pulled her into the main body of the mushroom creature. She kicked and slapped the surface, but her hands and feet stuck to it like hot tar.

The mushroom skin oozed over Chelsea, absorbing her until only her face remained. Her skin slowly turned to the same gray color as the mushroom stalk, and only her eyes remained. Oh god, those eyes. All of the tiny, flitting specks covering the creature were human eyes.

Then out of the thousands covering the monster, I was drawn to one pair of deep blue eyes. Michelle. She saw me, and I could sense that she recognized me. In that moment I felt her pain and fear, and the weight of the lost life that we would never share. She was trapped in eternal torment with no hope of redemption. I screamed.

Her eyes looked at me with a sense of urgency. She wanted me to go, to get away from this hellish place and back to safety. I looked at her one last time and mouthed the words, "I love you." Then I turned away like a coward and crawled out. The tunnel

shrank as I went, the walls closing in and threatening to crush me. I wormed my way out through the last few feet, the exit by then barely wider than my shoulders.

I fell out onto the concrete floor back in the real world, my empty heart beating from the exertion. Vorpall Geysir launched into another song. I knelt there on the floor and cried. It would have been better if Michelle was dead. I wished I was dead. Someone eventually grabbed my arm and guided me out of the crowd.

I tore my rotator cuff holding onto Chelsea, although I didn't feel it at the time. The doctor gave me a prescription for Vicodin to help with the pain, and it was easy to keep taking it even after I was physically recovered. I wanted it to help me forget, to take away the emotional pain. It took me a year to quit.

I should feel guilty for what I did to Chelsea—and I do, a little—but mostly my thoughts are consumed with Michelle. I can't stop seeing her tormented eyes, my beautiful girlfriend absorbed as part of that creature. I promised I would never leave her side.

Mary is a single mother of two, and she's never broken a rule in her life. We met online and started dating not long after. Earlier this week, I intentionally relapsed using the bottle of Vicodin I had secretly stashed away. Mary took off work and stayed with me for a couple of days to make sure I got clean.

We're going to a concert this weekend.

12th Ave North, Unit M

By Sara Lufrano

He found her sitting on the couch in the dark. "What are you doing awake?"
"I couldn't sleep. Do you want to sit with me?"
"No." He didn't find the couch comfortable but she liked it. "I want to lie down."
"Okay. Well, I'll be here."
"You'll be here all night?" He leaned against the wall, rubbed his eyes, and yawned.
"Probably. I'm not tired anymore."
"It's only been four hours."
"I napped earlier. I'm fine," she said.
"Were you playing music or singing or something?" he asked.
She shook her head.
"Okay. I'm going back to bed."

He lay there in bed, tightly holding his eyes closed. He was so tired. He thought he heard humming every night. It was a nonsensical song that he heard when he closed his eyes but couldn't hear when he listened for it.

His alarm went off. He wanted to yell into his pillow but instead lay there motionless hoping that the clock was wrong.

She leaned in the room holding onto the doorway. "I can make breakfast. How about that?"

He rubbed his eyes and turned off his alarm. "Sure, sure that sounds great. Coffee?"

"It's ready. Want me to pour you a cup?"

He nodded as he got out of bed. She stayed in the doorway and they kissed when he walked by.

"Do you feel okay?" he asked, walking to the dining area of the living room.

"Yes." She smiled.

“I’m worried about you being up all the time.”

“I’m fine.”

“Then I just miss you in bed.” He smiled.

She smiled.

He sat at the two-person table under the window and opened his laptop to check the news.

She walked through to the kitchen to start breakfast. He heard her humming. He slammed his laptop closed as he realized that it was her humming keeping him up at night.

He rushed to the kitchen and stared at her. “You hum that at night.”

“You can hear me?”

“Yes. I didn’t think it was you. I thought I was dreaming it or that it was the neighbors.”

She frowned. “I’m sorry.”

A fear of losing another night of sleep flared in him and he heard the humming in his mind. He needed her to sleep, or for her to leave, or he needed to get out.

But all he could say was, “I don’t want to wake up without you.”

“I’ll try,” she said.

He snapped awake in the dark. She wasn’t next to him. He heard her in the living room, pacing and humming. He got up and went to her. She turned to him and smiled.

“Hi,” she said.

“Why can’t you sleep?”

She stared wide-eyed and shook her head. His shoulders fell and he went to her, hugged her. He leaned his head on her head.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

“I feel fine.”

“Just because you feel fine doesn’t mean that you are,” he said. “What is happening?”

She shook her head.

He sighed. “Come back to bed, yeah?” He rubbed his hands slowly up and down her back.

She nodded and he led her by the hand. They lay down, holding hands. His eyes closed only for a few moments before he heard the humming. He looked at her. She was quiet. She looked peaceful. He stayed awake watching her, waiting for her to begin humming.

She was out of bed again when he woke. He didn’t know when he fell back asleep. She was sitting at the table, wrapped in a blanket looking out the window.

“Is it raining?” he asked.

“Yes. Good morning. Was I making noise?”

“Could have just been the rain.”

He sat down with her.

“How long have you been doing this?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I haven’t lived with anyone for a long time.”

“I worry about it. And you. I can’t sleep and I feel like shit. You have to be feeling the same.”

“I feel fine,” she said.

He shook his head. “I don’t believe that.”

It had been three weeks since he had a full night’s rest. Now his anger got in the way of caring and he let her hum and pace, all night, every night by herself. Nothing he said or suggested changed her behavior.

Every night he thought about leaving. Get up and go, leave her.

He thought about how he needed to break up with her. The reason was obvious to him. He knew she would cry. That would hurt him. But there was nothing else he was willing to do for her.

“I’m sorry,” she said as they were sitting on the couch after dinner. His eyes were wide, staring at the TV.

“Why?”

“You’re not sleeping because of me.”

He didn’t respond.

“I’m sorry.”

He didn’t respond.

“Maybe I’ll go stay at a hotel for a bit,” she said.

He sighed. “It’s your apartment. I’ll go.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

It had been two weeks after his hotel stay and gradually she was able to stay quiet most of the night. He didn’t know why or care how she was able to do it. Now he didn’t lie down at night worrying about not being able to sleep. She still rose early but didn’t disturb him enough to wake him.

“Morning.” He joined her in the kitchen and kissed her neck.

“Morning.”

“Did you sleep well?”

She nodded.

“Good. Me too.”

She fumbled putting the coffee pot back in the maker.

“You okay?” he asked grabbing her hand.

“I went to the doctor while you were gone,” she said. “She gave me medication to help me sleep and control the humming.”

“I knew there was a reason why. That’s great.” He pulled her into himself.

“My brain is also deteriorating as if I’m in the early stages of dementia.”

His grip on her didn’t change.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“I think I’m going to die.”

Now he stayed up most nights watching her sleep, making sure she was breathing. He couldn’t sleep for the thought of her dying, lying next to him.

While he watched her he thought about the first night he’d be able to sleep as much as he wanted. The night that she wouldn’t be there, he’d be able to sleep.

He knew he should be sad but he wasn’t. As the nights went on he turned impatient.

She died about a month later. He met her mom and dad while he moved his things. They gathered small possessions. Whatever they needed to remember her by.

Her mom offered a framed picture of her for him to take as a keepsake. He refused it. He didn’t need it. He had memories, enough of them, he told her mom when her face turned sour.

He left, drove to his new apartment and unpacked. There was no bed yet but he knew he could sleep.